Second traverse, as good as the first

Despite previously experience of the climatic challenges of the Otways, Brian Hornby was drawn back for a second go at this iconic ride.

The GREAT Southern Randonnée (GSR) is a great ride. GSR is a natural 1000 km course from Anglesea along the Great Ocean Road, into the Grampians and return through some beautiful scenery. An additional 200 km loop is added to make it a 1200 km ride. This is the second time I have ridden this iconic ride and both times the weather gods have thrown us a curve ball. In 2012 it was excessively hot on the first day of the ride, nice weather the second, followed by cold, wet southerly conditions on the third (Checkpoint 54, Summer 2012/13). This time, other than being just plain cold, there was a little rain and a lot of headwind on both the outbound ride and back.

On both occasions this ride has coincided with me needing a 1000 km ride to complete a Woodrup 5000 Award. While trying to encourage Queensland riders to participate, I suggested to Anthony Richardson that if he rode the 1000 km option he would also be up for a Woodrup 5000 award. Anthony hadn’t ridden many long rides since PBP 2015 (which he completed in 61 hours and 6 minutes) and agreed to ride provided that I stayed with him as he is not one for navigating or riding alone. It wasn’t so much me staying with him, as Anthony staying with me, as he is fast up hills and I am slow; the hare and the tortoise incarnate.

Training leading into GSR was a bit fragmented for me as I had a three-week holiday overseas during August with my wife and then another week at the end of October to attend a family wedding in New Zealand. The plan between the two holidays was to ride a 200 km permanent plus an additional 200–300 km each week. Followed by two 200 km brevets in early November. I achieved this goal with Anthony joining me for two of the 200 km permanent brevets. I had some company on the other brevets and only rode two solo. At the start of the training period I got very fatigued and couldn’t hold onto the pack when riding with my regular weekend riding group. They showed no mercy, waiting at strategic places just to flog me again. Having the week off at the end of October aided my recovery greatly which was then followed with the two 200 km brevets in November.

My plan for the ride was to start in the morning and get into sleep controls (Hamilton and Port Fairy) by midnight each night and be back on the road early the next mornings. Another strategy was not to stop in any non-sleep control for too long. There were staggered start times for riders: 1200 km riders could start Sunday evening or Monday morning with the 1000 km riders at either 4, 5 or 6 am. The weather conditions were not that exciting. Those that started Sunday night had a bad night with rain and wind. Mind you those who started in the morning had only marginally better conditions. Anthony and
I elected to start at 4 am on Monday morning.

Some of the 1200 km riders from the evening-start joined us at the start and we headed west from Anglesea along the coast with the wind in our faces, which was highly challenging. A course variation that was introduced owing to recent storms that had closed the Great Ocean Road was to head into the hills at Lorne. Heading into the wind along the coast was tough going and heading into the hills earlier than usual was a blessing as we were protected from the headwind for an additional 70 km while on this detour route.

We enjoyed the scenery of the Otway Ranges riding through lush farm country, stopping first at the control at Forrest. Forrest is a well-known mountain bike area and the control was a mountain bike shop/cafe. A welcomed bacon and egg muffin was provided for each rider. Anthony and I were in and out of the control quickly. Leaving the control, we teamed up with three Americans who were riding together in the rolling hills of the Otways. We were chatting away until Anthony and Mark Thomas rode off and the other two Americans dropped back out of sight. I caught Anthony and Mark going down Turtons Track. Turtons Track is probably the most picturesque road I have ever ridden, going through natural bush with deep gullies with a thick fern understory.

We continued with Mark until we arrived at the Lavers Hill cafe control. Riders were starting to converge on the control and staff were busy providing pre-arranged muffins. Mark had started with the evening group and decided to have an extended stop at the control. Anthony and I left quickly only to find it was still 5°C and raining—and we were about to descend Lavers Hill to the coast near the Twelve Apostles and back in the wind. Lunch was at Port Campbell Youth Hostel and Ronnie and the team had a great selection of food.

We continued, getting away from the Port Campbell control quickly. A pattern was starting to emerge: some of the faster riders that passed us were in the controls when we arrived but were still there when we left. Generally, it would take them 20–30 km along the route before they again passed us. We arrived at Port Fairy just after 8 pm where Sandy Vigar and crew provided a warming dinner. Despite the conditions, we made a reasonable time getting into the night control at Hamilton (383 km) by 1 am. We were happy with this although we arrived an hour later than we had planned. We were back on our bikes at 5.15 am, after a couple of hours sleep, heading into the Grampians.

The Grampians was magic, with high country kangaroos everywhere, scenic panoramas through unspoilt country, and less wind heading to Halls Gap. We were both feeling fresh and made good time getting to Halls Gap, completing the loop to Stawell returning to Halls Gap by 1 pm. Leaving Halls Gap towards Hamilton we came across the last of the riders heading from...
Hamilton to Halls Gap. Some of these riders had started in the evening start and had started that day from Port Fairy following a well-earned sleep. In the Hamilton control, we formed a group of four riders with Jan Erik Jensen and Mark Burton to ease the effect of the wind heading to Port Fairy. The wind fortunately dropped on the way allowing us to be in the night control by midnight. Back on track.

The next morning, we left the control just after 5 am, with another 280 km to the end. Back to Anglesea along the coast with a headwind—all we needed (this is Audax). Mark decided to continue riding with Anthony and me. Neither Anthony or Mark had a working Garmin, so they relied on me for navigation. At least they couldn’t ride too far away from me. We only had the one navigation error missing a turn going around the lake at Tower Hill. It was raining heavily and I couldn’t see my Garmin only to realise we were off course going down a nice decent. Anthony and Mark had taken off and I unfortunately had to go all the way to the bottom to tell them the error. In the next 100 km, I pieced together that in was the same error I made in 2012 in similar conditions.

Another variation from 2012 was that the route followed the coast from Warrnambool to Port Campbell. This part of the coast was picturesque and very enjoyable. Groups of riders were stopping for photo opportunities. We arrived at Port Campbell just after 11 am, in time for lunch.

Leaving Port Campbell, the route was the reverse of the way we had come two days earlier, which meant lots of hills. We arrived at Lavers Hill just as the cafe control was closing, which meant the control changed to local hall run by Helen and crew. A couple of rounds of sandwiches later we were on our way again. Fortunately, it was still daylight when we got to Turtons Track so we got to enjoy the ambience of the setting again climbing up the range.

We arrived at the Forrest control before dark and managed to get back on the road to enjoy the beautiful descent from Forrest down into the lush farmland before it got dark. The gentle climb up the range from Lorne on the way out was a major climb coming from the Forrest side. With over 900 km in the legs, I climbed very slowly to what I thought was the top only to determine there was still another climb to come. At the top of the range with 40 km to go, I got very drowsy so descended very slowly. The trip along the coast was also slow particularly on the uphill sections.

Anthony stayed with me for the whole ride relying on my ride plan and navigation. At times he did latch on to passing riders and talk about all sorts of things from Trump to global warming to anyone that would listen, and then wait for me further down the road. A great bit of advice Anthony extracted from an overseas rider was how to prevent saddle problems being to shave the area two or three days before any long ride.

We rolled into Anglesea at 12.30 am finishing in a time of 68 hours 30 minutes. Another well-organised GSR thanks to Peter Donnan and his crew. I am sure I will be back in 2020. Thanks to Anthony for sticking with me and providing me with humour and company through the tough patches.

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Audax Australia has ten SPOT Gen3 trackers active and available for ride organisers on large events to assist with the management of riders.

Individual Audax Australia members can also apply to loan a unit for a long event or tour subject to their need on the large events.

Tracking pages will be set up for large events so riders progress can be followed. Pete Heal in Canberra is currently managing the SPOT Trackers and he can be contacted at spots@audax.org.au.